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Letter dated 12 March 2008 from the Secretary-General addressed to the Permanent Representatives of Antigua and Barbuda and Cuba to the United Nations

I wish to thank you for your letter dated 7 March 2008 attaching comments of the Joint Coordinating Committee of the Group of 77 and China and the Non-Aligned Movement on my report on revised estimates relating to the strengthening of the Department of Political Affairs (A/62/521).

Please find attached a response from the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. B. Lynn Pascoe, to your original letter of 6 March 2008 (see annex). I endorse the contents of this response, and I hope that the clarifications provided will assist your members in their deliberations. Additional questions raised can be addressed through the Fifth Committee, and the Secretariat will provide information as may be required.

I believe that the specific points on language can be dealt with through the Fifth Committee, and the Under-Secretary-General and his staff will be on hand to respond to additional questions during these meetings.

I look forward to continuing to work closely with you and your members on the strengthening of the Department of Political Affairs and on all other matters.

(*Signed*) **Ban** Ki-moon

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Annex

11 March 2008

I wish to thank you for your letter dated 6 March 2008 reflecting the views of the Joint Coordinating Committee of the Group of 77 and China and the Non-Aligned Movement. As you requested, your letter has been circulated as a document of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 128, and the same will be done for this response. These letters will now become an integral part of the discussions on this item in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly. The Secretary-General and I remain appreciative of the support of the Joint Coordinating Committee for the strengthening of the Department of Political Affairs and recognize your commitment to urgently improving the United Nations capacity to prevent and resolve conflicts, which is a better investment than dealing with the costly aftermath of war.

Mandates

As you state in your letter, the core mandate of the Department of Political Affairs stems from the Charter of the United Nations, specifically Articles 1, 33 and 99, and subsequent General Assembly and Security Council documents and resolutions which have confirmed this important function, including document A/46/882 and General Assembly resolutions 47/120 and 57/337. Other pertinent mandates are listed in document A/62/521.

You raise a number of important issues in your letter and I want to assure your members that we will take their concerns into account, as we have sought to do throughout this consultation process. Most significantly, I want to make clear that the proposals contained in A/62/521 do not in any way attempt to expand on the role and function of the Department of Political Affairs as established in the above-mentioned mandates; they are proposals to strengthen the effectiveness of the Department in the delivery of its already assigned functions — the effort is to make the Department both more effective and active in carrying out its mandates. We have also taken note of the need for more interchange between the Department and the General Assembly, and I look forward to discussing modalities for such interaction with you and your members on a continuing basis.

As we have stated previously, the primary responsibility for conflict prevention lies with Member States. It is with this understanding that the Department of Political Affairs works closely with Member States and regional organizations within its mandates. In Africa, for instance, the advances made in resolving conflicts are largely through the efforts of African States and regional organizations such as the African Union. It is on this basis that we have requested additional resources to strengthen the office in Addis Ababa and to strengthen our cooperation with the African Union and its member States in some of the peacemaking initiatives being undertaken by the continent's leaders.

Regional offices

One core issue for your membership is the proposal on regional offices for the Department of Political Affairs. To be clear, these offices would be opened only with the prior consent of the host country and all countries in the region and an appropriate mandate, as established by Member States, on a case-by-case basis.

These offices would be established, over time and only if requested, as special political missions. The offices would be either co-located or closely aligned with regional and subregional organizations or United Nations entities to provide the necessary support and to leverage synergies and cooperation. I would also assure the members of the Joint Coordinating Committee that these offices will not have an extraterritorial mandate, and that they would be tailored to the specific needs of the region. There is no set formula for how these offices would conduct their work.

As your membership is aware, the Department of Political Affairs has established two regional offices in the past, the United Nations Office for West Africa, which was opened in Dakar in 2001, and the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia in Ashgabat, which was opened in 2007, after five years of consultations. In both cases, regional Member States and regional organizations were duly consulted and gave consent, and the host Governments assisted in the establishment of the offices.

If and when a new office is proposed, we will, as a part of the consultation process, provide the information requested in your letter, including draft terms of reference, proposed mandates, proposed interactions with existing United Nations and regional entities, reporting cycles, and relevant mandates for cross-cutting issues.

Please note that the list of potential offices given in A/62/521 was only indicative, and there is no specific request for funding regional offices in the document.

Geographic representation and gender balance

In considering staffing, we will give priority to women and men from underrepresented countries — consistent with the Secretary-General's commitments to Member States to meet the targets established by the General Assembly for both gender and geography. The strengthening of the Department of Political Affairs will allow us to bring in a sizable number of young officers at the P-2 and P-3 levels. We intend to source this staff, to the extent possible, from the national competitive examination rosters — which, by definition, are of persons from underrepresented Member States. We will also seek to improve geographic diversity within the Department.

Structure of the regional divisions

With regard to the regional divisions, it is apparent that a number of your members are concerned about the proposals for how they are to be subdivided into smaller units. The creation of subsections within the regional divisions was intended as a basis for assigning resources and as a bureaucratic and budgetary mechanism to divide workloads equitably. Nevertheless, the Department has taken note of the concerns raised by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and your members and we have also registered the more general comments with regard to the need to examine issues rather than specific countries as the basis for a division of labour. We have decided to continue the current practice of using flexible teams rather than dividing each regional division into formal sections and units.

In the West Asia Division, staff would ensure due coverage of Security Council mandates under the following agenda items: The situation in the Middle East; The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question; and The situation concerning Iraq. They would also ensure due coverage of General Assembly mandates under the following agenda items: Question of Palestine; The situation in the Middle East; Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance; Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples by the specialized agencies and the international institutions associated with the United Nations; and Cooperation between the United Nations and regional and other organizations. The work of the Division would include all tracks of the Middle East peace process.

Policy planning and cross-cutting issues

Your members query the dedication by the Department of Political Affairs of increased time and more staff to thematic and cross-cutting issues, particularly those that are dealt with by other relevant United Nations bodies or that do not have an explicit mandate from the General Assembly, as conflict prevention does. Several points are worth making in this regard. First, our increasing awareness of the complex nature of peace and security requires us to pay attention to the specific dimensions of a growing number of cross-cutting issues as they pertain to peace and security. Acting at the request of many Member States, the Department also needs to address certain problems that are shared across borders and regions. The Department does not seek to duplicate knowledge or capacity that exists elsewhere in the system but it requires a basic ability to channel that knowledge in a timely and targeted way.

Second, the quest for greater coherence and synergy across the United Nations system results in more, not less, demand on the Department for political advice and inputs, particularly from United Nations bodies that have technical mandates in cross-cutting areas but may lack the political knowledge to deliver on those mandates in a manner that is sensitive to the situation on the ground or to intergovernmental concerns. Decisions by Member States to create new bodies that cover cross-cutting issues, such as the Peacebuilding Commission, the Peacebuilding Support Office and the Peacebuilding Fund (General Assembly resolutions 60/180 and 60/287), also result in more, not less, demand upon the Department, since the outputs and decisions of those bodies must include political inputs. For instance, the Department is asked for advice on funding decisions taken by the Peacebuilding and Democracy Funds, to ensure that the funding contributes to shared objectives.

Many of these cross-cutting issues are the subject of regular debates in the General Assembly and other legislative bodies, as well as expectations of the Secretary-General to develop a position and advise Member States on the impact of such cross-cutting issues on peace and security. The Department of Political Affairs is the primary source of advice in this regard, and must be equipped accordingly.

Conclusions

I hope that the clarifications provided in this letter will assist your members during your discussions on this important issue. Additional questions raised by your members will, of course, be addressed through the deliberations of the Fifth Committee, and through the provision of supplementary information.

The specific points on language set out in your letter can be dealt with in the context of the Fifth Committee's discussions, and I and my staff will be on hand to provide additional clarifications during your meetings.

(*Signed*) B. Lynn **Pascoe**
Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs